“A Murmur of Small Voices”: On the Picture Postcard in Academic Research

SANDRA FERGUSON

RÉSUMÉ L’auteure essaie de comprendre dans cet article pourquoi les historiens et les chercheurs en sciences sociales ont traditionnellement hésité à considérer les cartes postales comme un sujet de recherche légitime. Les quelques chercheurs universitaires ayant choisi d’étudier la carte postale nous donnent des indices sur la source de ce préjugé dans leurs recherches. Cet article donne un aperçu des défis de 1’étude de la carte postale dans le contexte de son développement aux 19e et 20e siècles. L’examen des commentaires des chercheurs qui ont étudié les cartes postales donne des indices sur les variations de leur valeur comme document d’archives. En moins de cent ans, la carte postale est passée d’un objet omniprésent de la vie quotidienne à une note de bas de page occasionnelle et obscure dans les travaux universitaires et ce n’est que maintenant qu’elle commence à émerger de nouveau comme forme documentaire valable pour les chercheurs. Analyser et étudier ce paradoxe permet d’appréhender la nature de cette forme documentaire négligée mais importante socialement.

ABSTRACT This paper attempts to understand why historians and social researchers have traditionally been reluctant to consider the picture postcard as a subject of legitimate research. The few academics who have chosen to study postcards provide clues to the source of this prejudice in their research. The paper outlines the challenges of the postcard within the context of its development in the 19th and 20th centuries. Reviewing academics’ own comments on the use of postcards in their research provides clues as to the postcard’s shifting value as a record. In less than one hundred years, the postcard shifted from a ubiquitous part of daily life to an obscure and occasional academic footnote, and is only now beginning to re-emerge as a valuable documentary form for researchers. Reviewing and analyzing this paradox speaks to the nature of this much-neglected but socially important documentary form.

Introduction

In a 1978 *American Archivist* article, Walter Rundell Jr. recounts the story of a museum tour guide discussing clay tablets found at the palace of Knossos on Crete. Her comment was: “We don’t have the history of that period, because the clay tablets contain only information about what they did every day.”[1]

1 Walter Rundell Jr., “Photographs as Historical Evidence: Early Texas Oil,” *American Archivist* 41 (October 1978), p. 373.

The tour guide would likely agree with many scholars that a record of everyday life like the humble picture postcard is also a poor source of information from which to glean knowledge of past people and times. Yet on the surface, the picture postcard meets many of the criteria for "recordness" that one might choose to establish – especially postcards from the early twentieth century. These cards were made and received in the course of a variety of practical activities; they were often kept; they functioned as communication; they contributed to personal memory (and continue to contribute to social memory); they could even function as proof, albeit usually of something as benign as travel to a distant land. However from the limited postcard literature that exists, there has been – and still appears to be to some extent – a strong and quite explicit prejudice against the postcard in the realm of academic research. Rather than being considered a rich and almost endless source of information to mine again and again, the postcard is dismissed merely as the banal expression of popular culture. Why is this the case? After all, the postcard is an incredible chameleon: it can function as a documentary image, correspondence, a lithographic or photographic print, advertisement or ephemera. Furthermore, in any particular instance, it can function as any or all of these documentary forms simultaneously.

To determine why this prejudice exists, it is necessary to look at the influences that shaped the postcard and the academic worlds that have overlooked it.

The Picture Postcard's Inception and "Golden Age"

The first officially-sanctioned mailable postcard was sent in Austria on 1 October 1869. In many ways, it was the product of the dramatic transformations wrought in the West by the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century. This period of unprecedented technological and societal change, led to scores of new developments whose impacts would be felt in every sector of society. One of the earliest developments to directly contribute to the postcard's evolution was the emergence of a large middle class at the beginning of the 19th century. The mechanization of industry, economic expansion, and new emphasis on urbanization caused this group to grow and flourish, not to mention develop "ideas and feelings [that were] profoundly democratic."[2] Concepts such as literacy and ample leisure time that had formerly been the prerogative of the rich and noble were suddenly available to a much broader sector of society. Within the span of the century, the once-exclusive activities of written communication, pleasure travel, and parlour pursuits entered the domain of the common man. The picture postcard was one of the many popular devices that emerged to fill needs in these areas.

2 Gisèle Freund, *Photography and Society* (London, 1980), p. 20.

In great part, this new, literate society was responsible for the 19th century postal reforms that also paved the way for the postcard. The speed and frequency of mail delivery increased dramatically throughout the middle of the century as government and postal officials seized the opportunities offered by the newly-developed steam locomotive. By the end of the 1830s, railways were a well-established means of transporting mail across long distances, with the U.S. Congress even declaring in 1838 that all American railway lines were postal routes, and must carry the mail wherever possible or necessary.[3] Mail that had previously only been delivered weekly or fortnightly between major centres now arrived as frequently as every day. Then in 1840, British Treasury official Rowland Hill successfully lobbied for a substantial reduction in British postal rates by basing them on weight rather than distance carried. The result of Hill's labours was the advent of the "penny post" (referring to the one-penny charge for letters up to half an ounce[4]) – an enormous decrease in cost for letters sent over any great distance. Hill correctly predicted that this change would lead to a huge increase in the popularity of personal mail: an increase made possible by the growing percentage of society that could read and write. By making personal mail inexpensive and popular, Hill created a fertile ground for the development of a mailing instrument like the postcard: one that was cheap, simple, and appropriate for communicating brief messages that could be delivered quickly to the recipient. Hill's reforms influenced postal policy across the globe, and set the stage for other changes in post office policy, such as free home delivery. By the early 20th century, thanks to initiatives such as the U.S. Post Office's Rural Free Delivery, even very isolated individuals were benefiting from daily mail delivery to their front door.[5] And while new conveniences such as the telegram or telephone, were expensive or not yet available,[6] even the very poor and rural dwellers could achieve the same ends by buying and sending postcards to communicate quickly and inexpensively with friends and family.[7]

The picture postcard's genesis also relied heavily on another of the major inventions of the Industrial Revolution: the photograph. The development of photographic technology in the 1830s created a powerful public appetite for "real" pictures – this appetite drove photographic innovators to continually strive to improve their processes and products throughout the rest of the cen-

3 Canadian Museum of Civilization, "A Chronology of Canadian Postal History: 1760–1840 – Planting the Imperial Postal System in British North America." Available at <http://www.civilization.ca/cpm/chrono/chs1760e.html>, accessed 15 January 2005.

4 Ibid., <http://www.civilization.ca/cpm/chrono/ch1840be.html>, accessed 15 January 2005.

5 Hal Morgan and Andreas Brown, *Prairie Fires and Paper Moons: The American Photographic Postcard, 1900–1920* (Boston, 1981), xiii.

6 Paul J. Vanderwood and Frank N. Samponaro, *Border Fury: A Picture Postcard Record of Mexico's Revolution and U.S. War Preparedness, 1910–1917* (Albuquerque, 1988), pp. 2–3.

7 Frank Staff, *The Picture Postcard and Its Origins* (London, 1966), p. 64.

tury. Mid-century innovations such as Disderi's *carte-de-visite* (which allowed several exposures to exist on one negative) helped to make photography affordable to the expanding middle class.[8] As a result, the rules of mass manufacture began to shape photography: the photographic studio "had to respond to [the] clientele's taste as well as to its own economic requirements."[9] The public began to eagerly collect *cartes-de-visite*[10] (and other similar photographic products, such as cabinet cards and stereoscopic views[11]) by the dozen, keeping them in elaborate albums and bringing them out as parlour entertainment. While able to be produced on a relatively large scale, these forms consisted of actual photographic prints, and therefore still relied on labour-intensive darkroom processes for their production. With the invention of photolithography in the late 19th century, images could be produced by the thousands, easily and cheaply. This device, quickly adopted by the postcard trade, was the final piece of the puzzle needed to create the postcard phenomenon.

Nearly three million postcards were sold in Austria-Hungary in the first three months after the first card was issued in 1869.[12] Other countries quickly followed suit, and by the mid-1870s, most of the Western world was using the half-penny or penny postcard.[13] Early postal regulations did not allow images, but for only the address and stamp to be placed on one side, and the message to be written on the other. Decorated writing cards and writing paper had been popular since the late 18th century,[14] and it was not long before postcard manufacturers began to experiment with similar embellishments. Because printing technologies were limited to drypoint, engraving, and lithography (and, as previously mentioned, actual photographic prints themselves), such cards were costly and relatively rare. Once mass printing technologies were established however, postcard publishers were quick to replace the message side of the postcard with an image from a photograph, and the picture postcard as we know it was born.

By 1900 the manufacture of cheap printed picture postcards was in full swing,[15] and from there the postcard exploded into a full-blown cultural phenomenon. Dates for this "Golden Age of Postcards" (as it is typically called) vary from source to source, but generally refer to the period of time between 1900 and the beginning of World War I in 1914. This fifteen-year period argu-

8 Freund, *Photography and Society,* pp. 20 and 56.

9 Ibid., p. 59.

10 Michael Langford, *The Story of Photography: From Its Beginnings to the Present Day* (London, 1980), p. 22.

11 Jib Fowles, "Stereography and the Standardization of Vision," *Journal of American Culture* 17 (1994), p. 89.

12 Staff, *The Picture Postcard and Its Origins,* p. 47.

13 Ibid., p. 49.

14 T.J. Brady, "Postcards and History," *History Today* 19 (December 1969), p. 849.

15 Staff, *The Picture Postcard and Its Origins,* p. 99.

ably marks the first era in which there was widespread popular usage of photographic images, since the postcard was wildly successful both as correspondence and collectible.

Collectibility, as with earlier forms such as the *carte-de-visite*, was an aspect of the postcard that manufacturers exploited early and often. Postcards were published in numbered sets to encourage collecting, and postcards were also often kept in display albums, maintaining pride of place in parlours and sitting rooms.[16] Customized photo cards, which consisted of an actual photographic print stamped or printed with a mailing template on the back, allowed individuals and small companies or groups to easily create their own picture postcards.[17] Such was the collecting craze that postcards were often sent and received to and from strangers by the dozen. It is common to find cards of this era bearing inscriptions like "Here's a good one for your collection, Friend – please send me one when you are able." Advertisements for postcard penpals were common in magazines, and picture postcard clubs were set up around the world.[18] In 1900, the British firm of Raphael Tuck even offered a prize of £1,000 to the collector who could accumulate the most Tuck cards.

Increased levels of education and the newly-created ability to travel quickly and cheaply by rail engendered a new enthusiasm for travel and knowledge about far-away places in the 19th century.[19] As people traveled to distant locales, early picture postcards were an ideal way in which travelers could illustrate to family and friends the places and people they visited. To those who did not travel far from home, postcards depicting current events were frequently the only means by which people could easily obtain visual information about happenings of the day.[20] To put it into a twenty-first-century context, postcard researcher Naomi Schor suggests that early postcards "functioned like a cross between the modern print and communications media, something like CNN, *People*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *National Geographic* all rolled into one ..."[21]

This complex and unique combination of circumstances led to an absolute craze for the picture postcard. In 1909–1910, at the height of the postcard's popularity, it is estimated that more than 850 million postcards were mailed in the United Kingdom[22]: the equivalent of twenty for every man, woman, and child living there. The postcard phenomenon also extended worldwide; large production estimates are given for other countries around the world, including

16 Naomi Schor, "*Cartes postales:* Representing Paris 1900," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Winter 1992), p. 239.

17 Vanderwood and Samponaro, *Border Fury,* p. 4.

18 Staff, *The Picture Postcard and Its Origins,* p. 64.

19 Langford, *The Story of Photography,* p. 39.

20 Vanderwood and Samponaro, *Border Fury,* p. 3.

21 Schor, "*Cartes postales:* Representing Paris 1900," p. 193.

22 Staff, *The Picture Postcard and Its Origins,* p. 91.

developing countries (although it is generally acknowledged that most postcards created in colonized nations were created for consumption by Western colonizers rather than native citizens[23]). Like most crazes, however, postcards attracted their share of detractors. As early as 1899 they were being denounced in print: "The illustrated postcard craze, like the influenza, has spread to [Great Britain] from the Continent, where it has been raging with considerable severity ... young ladies who have escaped the philatelic infection or wearied of collecting Christmas cards have been known to fill albums with missives of this kind received from friends abroad."[24]

This intense popularity was to last only about fifteen years, however. The telephone took over from the post as the prevailing system of communication, and the inexpensive novelty of moving pictures pulled attention away from home entertainments like the postcard album. Additionally, the advent of World War I further hastened the postcard's decline, although postcards continued to play an important role throughout the conflict.[25] Germany had been a major world centre for colour postcard printing,[26] so the declaration of war meant that a major source of cards was suddenly unavailable to many countries. The war also led to increased censorship and rising postal costs,[27] both of which reduced the desirability of postcards as a mailing instrument.

So ended the Golden Age of postcards. Postcard researcher Naomi Schor sums up the decline of the postcard in this way:

> After the golden age of the postcard came its decadence. The quality of the images declined, the craze for postcard collecting waned, and albums formerly displayed in the living room were relegated to the attic. The difference between the sparkling, richly detailed view-cards of the first decade of the century and the muddy sepia-colored view cards of the thirties provides striking and highly legible information about the shift in urban self-representation from the prewar period to the depression years.[28]

Despite the postcard's dwindling popularity, collecting postcards from the Golden Age remained a popular pastime for many. In the 1920s these collectors conferred on themselves the name "deltiologists," from the Greek "deltas," for "tablet."[29] Whether these interested amateurs delayed the entry of the

23 David Prochaska, "Fantasia of the *Photothèque:* French Postcard Views of Colonial Senegal," *African Arts* 24 (October 1991), p. 40; Christaud M. Geary and Virginia-Lee Webb, *Delivering Views: Distant Cultures in Early Postcards* (Washington, DC, 1998), p. 1; others.

24 Article from *The Standard,* quoted in Staff, *The Picture Postcard and Its Origins,* p. 60.

25 John Laffin, "The Neglected War Picture Postcard," in John Laffin, *World War I in Postcards* (Gloucester, UK, 1988).

26 Staff, *The Picture Postcard and Its Origins,* p. 58.

27 Brady, "Postcards and History," p. 855.

28 Schor, "*Cartes postales:* Representing Paris 1900," pp. 239–40.

29 Keith A. Sculle, "'Gee, but aint money slippery at Old Orchard Beach, Me.?': For the Reading of Picture Postcards," *Lamar Journal of the Humanities* 24 (Spring 1999), p. 47.

postcard into academic society by fostering the perception of the postcard merely as a collectible is hard to say. It is undeniable, however, that their research and enduring interest spanned a fifty-year lacuna, keeping alive much crucial knowledge about early postcards that would likely have been lost otherwise.

Why (Not) Postcards? The Postcard in Academic Research

Although the postcard was a ubiquitous and influential means of communication for much of the world over a significant span of time, it was not considered a natural choice of subject matter for researchers until very recently. In fact, serious postcard literature is essentially non-existent prior to the 1970s (*pace* deltiologists), and does not appear with any frequency in academic journals until the 1990s.

It can be argued that any new documentary form must come of age before it can emerge as a subject of study, but the postcard appears to have suffered a much slower rise to prominence than other genres, and for very specific reasons. Nowhere are these reasons more clearly laid out than in the written commentaries of postcard researchers themselves: an analysis of their praise for – or censure of – the picture postcard reveals a struggle both to wrest meaning from an enigmatic genre, and an attempt to prevail against abiding academic theories that would asperse such a documentary form. Although postcard research proves to be as cogent and compelling as any other academic inquiry, almost every postcard researcher betrays in his or her writing a marked lack of comfort with the postcard form. Writers regularly devote many words (and sometimes even entire sections) in their work to reviewing the merits of the genre, justifying, apologizing for, or sometimes even denigrating their choice of subject matter. By doing so, postcard researchers are tacitly attempting to deflect anticipated criticisms, or to convince a skeptical audience that, indeed, an article based on postcards is worth the time and effort to read. As Keith Sculle, in his article on cultural themes in postcards of Old Orchard Beach states: “Postcard students themselves have occasionally slighted their subject in deference to elite versus popular culture.”[30] Surprisingly strong words like “humble,” “detritus,” and “easy to despise” have been used to describe the picture postcard by postcard scholars themselves. What about the form solicits such words from the very people who should logically be its staunch defender? An analysis of postcard research reveals two fundamental issues that researchers grapple with again and again, issues that invoke this powerful response.

The first hurdle researchers face from the postcard is the challenge it poses as a genre, both in terms of form and content. Anthropologist Nicholas Peter-

30 Ibid., p. 50.

son sums up several inherent problems with the postcard in his 1985 article on postcards of aboriginal Australians. He refers to the "huge quantities of images"; the "impossibility of dating most of them accurately"; the "lack of any indication as to how widely circulated and seen they were"; the "frequent absence of information on the photographer, the content or the context of the picture."[31] Primarily, Golden Age picture postcards were created as a commodity to be collected and traded by a largely undiscriminating audience. As such, their image content was clearly driven by free market forces, rather than the intention to present an accurate depiction of people, places, or things. As a result, there was little emphasis on the kind of metadata that Peterson (and other researchers) clearly craved. Even when such information was provided, analysis of Golden Age postcards has shown that captions were frequently changed, or images blatantly altered to add or remove elements in the original image. Paul Vanderwood and Frank Samponaro show multiple examples of these phenomena in propaganda postcards of the Mexican Revolution in their book *Border Fury.*[32] Similarly, David Prochaska's analysis of postcards of colonial Senegal exposes that "outright errors occur ... captions attribute to Senegal photographs that clearly depict Guinea."[33]

Other researchers have shown how postcard photographs of native peoples were frequently staged with antiquated or fictionalized costumes and props to reinforce the romantic image of the "exotic" locales in which they lived.[34] Such widespread inaccuracy means that the trustworthiness of most cards must be suspect, even when other aspects of a card pass the test of authenticity.

Other challenges spring from researching a body of records, that by their very form and function, were designed to be dispersed far and wide from their point of origin. By example: in researching early postcards of Montevideo, researchers Catherine Preston and Anton Rosenthal determined that most cards sent from the city were mailed to Barcelona, Madrid, Paris, Buenos Aires, Milan, and the Uruguayan interior.[35] In turn, these postcards were later acquired by interested individuals or organizations and incorporated into their collections. And because this can be extrapolated to literally hundreds of publishers and many millions of items worldwide (Preston and Rosenthal indicate they analyzed at least two thousand postcards,[36] and Vanderwood and Sam-

31 Nicholas Peterson, "The Popular Image," in Ian Donaldson and Tasmin Donaldson, eds., *Seeing the First Australians* (Winchester, MA, 1985), p. 164.

32 Vanderwood and Samponaro, *Border Fury,* pp. 58–60; others.

33 Prochaska, "Fantasia of the *Photothèque,*" p. 44.

34 Patricia C. Albers and William R. James, "Travel Photography: A Methodological Approach," *Annals of Tourism Research* 15 (1988), p. 141; Annelies Moors and Steven Machlin, "Postcards of Palestine: Interpreting Images," *Critique of Anthropology* 7 (Autumn 1987); others.

35 Catherine Preston and Anton Rosenthal, "*Correo Mìtico:* The Construction of a Civic Image in the Postcards of Montevideo, Uruguay, 1900–1930," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 15 (1996), p. 235.

36 Ibid., p. 257.

ponaro estimate they reviewed at least 20,000 cards – some found as far afield as London, Paris, and Madrid[37]), this broad scattering can render certain types of analysis nearly impossible. Similarly, the custodial history of a Golden Age postcard beyond its initial purchase (and mailing, if applicable) is generally obscure: postcards' enduring appeal as collectibles means that they are subject to frequent (and often undocumented) changes of ownership beyond their initial purchase and mailing. This aspect of the nature of postcards poses difficulties for researchers hoping to draw conclusions about the source or lifecycle of particular cards or groups of cards. As Patricia Albers and William James (who have written many times on representations of different cultures in tourist postcards) point out: "the methodological limits of the postcard are the same as those of any other relic or object that has been taken from the context in which it was originally produced and consumed."[38]

A further stumbling block to postcard research is that changes in attitudes about and around photographic images in the late nineteenth century were profoundly different than those of today. For example, in the nineteenth century, "authorship" was frequently attributed not to the photographer but to the photographic firm.[39] When a postcard studio was sold to another firm, the stock was often renamed or renumbered to fit in with that of the new publisher. David Prochaska also points out the potential of being misled as to the authenticity of a postcard view, even when it is a reprint from the same firm. He uses the example of Fortier, a French postcard publisher who produced many images of Senegal and other French African colonies. "4,215 of a total of 7,480 images are reprints ... Fortier issued the same photograph twice, sometimes three times, but with different numbers and different captions."[40]

The second challenge that postcard researchers have faced is the scholarly environment in which they operate. The elements that created the postcard also created the research methodologies of the 19th and 20th centuries. As John Berger and Jean Mohr state in *Another Way of Telling:* "Positivism and the camera and sociology grew up together. What sustained them all as practices was the belief that observable facts, recorded by scientists and experts, would one day offer man such a total knowledge about nature and society that he would be able to order them both."[41]

The irony of this statement in regard to photography (and by extension, the postcard) is that some of these very elements made it profoundly incompatible with the prevailing methodologies of the disciplines with which it shared a common genesis. As such, this incompatibility kept the postcard

37 Vanderwood and Samponaro, *Border Fury,* ix.

38 Albers and James, "Travel Photography: A Methodological Approach," p. 139.

39 Prochaska, "Fantasia of the *Photothèque,*" p. 44.

40 Ibid.

41 John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling* (New York, 1982), p. 99.

"fugitive from scholarship"[42] in history, as well as the social sciences for many years.

Academe had been as affected by the changes of the 19th century as any other sector of society. The contemporary belief that scientific principles could be applied to a discipline like the study of history led to the professionalization of the historian at universities and other centres of research. Prominent historians – most notably Leopold von Ranke – attempted to obtain objective knowledge about history through the practice of methodologically controlled research.[43] By establishing the practice of utilizing primary archival sources such as official government records rather than the chronicles favoured by earlier historians, they intended to create more objective, more "scientific" histories than had been written in the past.[44] These influential theories continue to affect historiography to this day. Although photography was well established by the middle of the 19th century, photography was too new – both in form and in concept – to obtain credence at the point when the culture of the historical discipline was shifting to incorporate archival documents. As a result, the photographic medium languished outside the scope of academic scrutiny for many decades following its emergence.

Well into the 20th century (and even the 21st), historians displayed a strong disinclination to use photographs. Nancy Malan notes that "[historians] have not been trained to interpret photographs. On the contrary, they generally associate them with an unscholarly, storybook approach to history."[45] Verena Winiwarter comments: "If postcards are used at all [by historians], they are to illustrate what things looked like in 1910 or 1931."[46] Evans and Richards point out that it is "easy enough to despise [the postcard]; the traditional historian ... has been reluctant enough to admit the value of film for history, let alone the humble postcard photograph."[47] In his 1985 article on postcards of aboriginal Australians, anthropologist Nicholas Peterson confirms that similar prejudices exist in the social sciences.[48]

In cases where historical photographs have been used to support research findings, it has frequently been in a sloppy or unsophisticated manner that perpetuates their reputation as being inherently unreliable. Malan expresses her

42 Sculle, "'Gee, but aint money slippery at Old Orchard Beach, Me.?'," p. 50.

43 Georg Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover, NH, 1997), p. 2.

44 Peter Burke, *History and Social Theory* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 6.

45 Nancy E. Mahan, "American Women Through the Camera's Eye," in Mabel E. Deutrich and Virginia C. Purdy, eds., *Clio Was a Woman: Studies in the History of American Women* (Washington, DC, 1980), p. 260.

46 Verena Winiwarter, "Buying a Dream Come True," *Rethinking History* 5, no. 3 (2001), p. 452.

47 Eric J. Evans and Jeffrey Richards, *A Social History of Britain in Postcards, 1870–1930* (New York, 1980), p. 2.

48 Peterson, "The Popular Image," p. 164.

discontent that poor use of photos "reinforc[es] already established prejudices," with Peterson pointing out that "many new books [recycle] old images."[49] Peterson also reminds us that "reading" images is not a natural process in Western society. He aptly sketches how Westerners respond to an image: "When asked to describe what we see in a picture, we often switch between comments on content, aesthetics, and technique, seeing the picture sometimes from an observer's viewpoint and sometimes from that of its subject. When looking at photographs from an earlier period there is the further complication that we are tempted to introduce modern readings into the original contexts."[50]

As Peterson indicates, the assumption that photographs are too problematic for extensive, systematic analysis was generally held as recently as the mid-1980s. Even so, at the same time this attitude was being slowly eroded by a newer perspective on photographs, aided in great part by postmodern ideas and writings that were gaining acceptance in that decade. These new approaches to the image did not dispute the acknowledged concerns with photography, but rather used them as critical tools with which to undertake a serious study of symbology, visual comprehension, and knowledge. Postcard researchers from the same era (and beyond) reflect the influence of these new philosophies on interpretation of photographs. For example, Annelies Moors and Steven Machlin reflect the methodological relativism that has influenced late-20th-century anthropology in their essay on the reading of postcards of Palestine: "[in the past] photographs were understood to be unmediated reproductions of reality. But the image itself, outside a context, offers no more than the possibility of meaning."[51] Similarly, Keith Sculle's comments on photography reflect concepts introduced and reinforced by such influential late-20th-century thinkers as Susan Sontag and Jean-Luc Godard: "[I]t is now axiomatic that photographs do not reveal unquestionable facts but rather the photographer's perspective. By what is omitted on the margins outside the image as well as what is included within the photograph's frame, its creator exercises selectivity."[52]

Notwithstanding these inroads, there were still strongly entrenched perspectives from the past that dominated historical and social scientific disciplines late into the 20th century. Despite the intentional break that had been created between the older literary tradition of history and the mid-19th-century "scientific" history, the latter research model continued to share many fundamental assumptions with its predecessor: for example the theory that history portrays people who really existed and actions that really took place, and belief in a one-

49 Ibid.
50 Ibid., p. 165.
51 Moors and Machlin, "Postcards of Palestine: Interpreting Images," p. 61.
52 Sculle, "'Gee, but aint money slippery at Old Orchard Beach, Me.?'," p. 52.

dimensional chronology, whereby later events follow earlier ones in a coherent sequence.[53] Not surprisingly, the Rankean model (and most of its descendents) also continued to focus on key events and the "great men" in history. The influence of this ideology was powerful and far-reaching in Western consciousness, as evidenced by attitudes such as that of Walter Rundell's Cretan tour guide. Being born into this environment sealed the picture postcard's fate for many decades. Not only were postcards too contemporary to be reviewed in the context of history, but with such a prevailing attitude, a documentary form such as the postcard would not really be considered a true record by academics. It had been bourgeois society, not the academic elite, that embraced photography and made it their own. This new class of society, with disposable income but little of the "taste" of elites, drove the strong commercial (rather than artistic) market for photography throughout the 19th century (and the market for the postcard in the 20th). As Keith Sculle states: "Not taxing of thought, the postcard's appeal is its instantaneous communication of a widely accepted image, one shared sufficiently for printers to risk mass production."[54] Add to this idea the glitter, tea-shop advertisements and fold-out panoramic tourist views adorning many picture postcards, and it is unsurprising that the academic elite was disengaged from the idea of the postcard as a "record."

As an item manufactured for, and used by, the general public in the course of daily life, its contents rarely, if ever, reflected the actions and events of interest to the contemporary historian. The postcard existed almost entirely in the realm of the personal: the communications on the card were generally cursory and commonplace and most senders and recipients were utterly without social or political importance. Even once postcard research began to appear, it was clear that the authors continued to be influenced by the prevailing attitudes in their fields. Keith Sculle points out that "[b]iography has been a genre for historians but it is extensive manuscript collections, not postcard messages, that biographers have sought. Moreover, the great majority of those sending or receiving postcards are apt not to be people biographers pursue."[55] Sculle also suggests that "[a]s a discipline founded initially in the critical reading of manuscripts and priding itself on narrative skill, history might at most be drawn to the words written and/or printed on postcards. The highly individualized content of the written messages, however, recommends little value for understanding the collective activities of individuals as society."[56] Nor is Sculle is the only researcher to suggest that postcards lack substance. Eric Evans and Jeffrey Richards make a point of writing: "The word 'picture postcard' means to most people lurid coloured cartoons of fat ladies and weedy lit-

53 Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century*, p. 3.
54 Sculle, "'Gee, but aint money slippery at Old Orchard Beach, Me.?'," p. 49.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.

tle men on the beach, captions like 'I've lost my little Willie',"[57] the implication being that such items are not worthy of scholarly scrutiny.

In a 1991 article on colonial African postcards, David Prochaska, an art historian and postcard collector, downplays his personal interest in postcards as a purely amateur pursuit: "Most of us who admit to collecting cards from Chad, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, or wherever, have probably never given these pieces of colonial detritus a second thought ... The products of mass, popular culture, they are considered by mainstream art historians as degraded versions of 'high' art photography ... In short, we tend not to take them seriously.[58]

Although further changes to the historical research model continued as the 19th century gave way to the 20th, the nature of these changes continued to hold the postcard at arm's length from academe. By the end of the nineteenth century, some historians had become critical of the Rankean model, and were searching for a history that would concentrate less on events and leading personalities, and more on the social and economic conditions in which they existed. Historian Georg Iggers points out that "democratization and the emergence of a mass society also called for a historiography that took into account the role of broader segments of the population and the conditions under which they lived."[59] There were increased efforts to challenge the primacy of political history and replace it with a "wider and more human history" that would focus on an analysis of social structures.[60] While conventional political and diplomatic history continued to dominate historiography until the 1960s, the social history movement gained more proponents as the century progressed.[61] Despite the emergence of historical models that addressed a broader array of societal issues than simply political or diplomatic concerns, the postcard was still too personal and too minor to suit methodologies that were focused on the larger systems and structures of society.

Similar developments in sociology and anthropology in the 19th and 20th centuries first excluded and then cautiously accepted the postcard. Although history and the social sciences had overlapped in many ways in the nineteenth century, by the 1920s, social theorists had turned away from the study of the past for a variety of reasons. Social science disciplines like cultural anthropology, that might at least have considered the postcard, were themselves only being developed during the postcard's heyday. Although social anthropologists were also discovering the value of fieldwork and the study of cultures and societies "close up" during the apex of the postcard's popularity, Peter Manicas suggests that these disciplines' study of contemporary society was

57 Evans and Richards, *A Social History of Britain in Postcards,* p. 2.
58 Prochaska, "Fantasia of the *Photothèque,*" p. 40.
59 Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century,* p. 5.
60 Burke, *History and Social Theory,* p. 16.
61 Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century,* p. 5.

only firmly established in the 1920s[62] – well after the picture postcard phenomenon had burnt itself out.

In the 1960s, there was a major shift in Western thought, as "the consciousness of a crisis of modern society and culture, long in preparation, came to a head."[63] Political, social and economic changes took place in a world with a new global perspective. From these changes, new ideas emerged that questioned the social, and political bias of past histories; these chose to focus on groups such as women and ethnic minorities that had typically been excluded from traditional historiography. These trends marked a new period of fragmentation; for many historians, this period also marked the end of the possibility of the "grand narrative"[64] that was implicitly accepted in earlier historical traditions. It also opened the floodgates to new, unorthodox epistemologies of history, society, and culture. As Iggers states: "If the social science-oriented history had sought to replace the study of politics with that of society, the new history turned to the study of culture understood as the conditions of everyday life and everyday experience."[65] It was in this environment that a documentary form like the postcard could finally begin to gain credence as a research tool. Although the postcard did not see an immediate growth in its academic respectability, its eventual acceptance was as a result of these changes. The explosion of interest in media and communications theory in the 1960s and 1970s, led by Marshall McLuhan, had a profound long-term effect on society and critical thought,[66] provoking a new look at different modes of communication. The new histories and social sciences also turned away from the traditional focus on elites and systems of power, and chose to focus instead on the lives of "regular people," and popular culture.[67] History and the social sciences were further influenced by emerging contextualist philosophies of the 60s, 70s, and 80s, that directly challenged fundamental assumptions of "truth" and "reality" inherent in the rationalist tradition. The emergence of semiotics as a study engendered an interest in symbology and image, with many postcard researchers drawing on the writings of Derrida, Barthes, and Foucault[68] to support their assertions.

In such a climate, the popular images and "highly individualized" messages of postcards – traditionally considered too insignificant for historians and

62 Peter T. Manicas, *A History and Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1987), p. 226.

63 Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century,* p. 6.

64 Ibid., p. 7.

65 Ibid., p. 8.

66 Keith F. Davis, *An American Century of Photography: From Dryplate to Digital* 2d ed. (Kansas City, MO, 1999), p. 397.

67 For example, Brooke Baldwin's "On the Verso: Postcard Messages as a Key to Popular Prejudices," *Journal of Popular Culture* 22 (Winter 1988).

68 Albers and James, "Travel Photography: A Methodological Approach"; Schor, "*Cartes postales:* Representing Paris 1900"; others.

social scientists – were transformed. The postcard lent itself well to these emerging modes of thought in which the very elements that had previously branded the postcard unsuitable and difficult – such as its crude (but powerful) iconography, personal resonance, and transient existence – were now considered exciting new avenues for review and analysis. For example, rather than disparaging a recognized lack of reliability in postcard images, Annelies Moors and Steven Machlin choose to exploit that lack of reliability in showing how staged scenes and the use of antiquated costumes and props reinforced orientalist and biblical impressions of Palestine and its inhabitants in the early 20th century.[69] Researchers Patricia Albers and William James review how semiotic analysis of tourist postcards can illustrate the relationship between photography, ethnicity, and travel.[70]

Comments made by postcard scholars themselves about their subject also serve to illustrate the changing attitudes within their disciplines. For example, in 1985, anthropologist Nicholas Peterson states: “it can be presumed that [postcards] are a distillation of the images of most contemporary interest, so that some cultural significance resides in the themes selected, the relative proportions on each theme, and the imagery.”[71]

In 1991, historian David Prochaska echoed Peterson’s thoughts:

> I began to take a second and third and fourth look at postcards when I realized that as photographs made to be sold – commercial photographs with exchange value as opposed to private photographs with sentimental value – they might say something about the market for such things, about the people who bought and sold them, and about their *mentalité.* What a commercial photographer sells, after all, has to correspond in a rough and ready way to what a customer is willing to buy. Rather than their originality, it is precisely their lack of originality that makes postcards significant.[72]

He goes on to say that: “rather than being unique works of art canonized by connoisseurs exercising taste, it is precisely their status as objects of material production and cultural reproduction – there are so many copies available of such similar subjects – that demands interrogation.”[73]

Peterson also acknowledges that:

> all postcards have a varying degree of additional contextual and sociological information which greatly enhances the possibilities for locating some of their contemporary meaning. Almost all postcards carry captions and, usually, information on the pub-

69 Moors and Machlin, “Postcards of Palestine: Interpreting Images.”
70 Albers and James, “Travel Photography: A Methodological Approach,” pp. 147–50.
71 Peterson, “The Popular Image,” pp. 167–68.
72 Prochaska, “Fantasia of the *Photothèque,*” p. 40.
73 Ibid.

lisher. Where the card has been used, a range of other information may be available, including the sex and place of residence of the sender and addressee, the date of posting and the views, explicit or implied, of the sender of the image.[74]

Likewise, Evans and Richards point out that postcards' messages and images reveal "speech patterns, standards of literacy, social attitudes, current preoccupations, fads and fashions ... buildings now demolished, vehicles now obsolete, costumes no longer worn, customs fallen into disuse, the landmarks and signposts of a way of life ...[75]

Albers and James agree:

The strength of the postcard lies in the medium itself: its ubiquity, diversity and narrative text. Postcards have been inexpensive, widely marketed and accessible to tourists. They have been produced in large numbers, and they have pictured a wide and diversified range of subjects. Finally, postcards have printed captions and private messages that can aid in interpreting the "semiotics" of their pictures.[76]

And finally, as Evans and Richards point out, the postcard researcher cannot forget that "the medieval historian would give his eye teeth for postcards from the peasants and nobles of his era with whatever scraps of information they might contain about the pattern of existence."[77]

Conclusion

Like any documentary medium, postcards' value is circumscribed by the limitations of the genre. Historically, however the picture postcard was viewed within an overly narrow academic context. In that context, certain truths were considered immutable: for example, that "history" related only to select stories of privileged individuals and groups in society; or that images could only serve as illustrations in the analysis of "legitimate" documentary forms, rather than be the subject of such analysis themselves. Because postcards could not illuminate the lives of "great men" and their deeds, scholars concluded – consciously or unconsciously – that the postcard was not a worthy object to study. As such, it was virtually impossible for the Golden Age postcard to gain a foothold in academe, despite its worldwide importance as a communication tool of the early 20th century. Since the late 1970s, however, a growing number of researchers have asserted the postcard's value as record – at first in a tentative fashion, then later wholeheartedly. These early postcard researchers

74 Peterson, "The Popular Image," p. 168.
75 Evans and Richards, *A Social History of Britain in Postcards,* pp. 2–3.
76 Albers and James, "Travel Photography: A Methodological Approach," p. 139.
77 Evans and Richards, *A Social History of Britain in Postcards,* p. 2.

did their disciplines a service by applying research methodologies to a new medium; one that carried at least the perceived risk of censure by their colleagues. As researchers found, once the prevailing cultures of their disciplines began to shift, the postcard could offer a plethora of opportunity for the researcher. To paraphrase Peter Wosh from his article "Going Postal," they stopped asking "what is a record?," and started examining what's in a record.[78]

Many researchers focused on the dominant image element of the picture postcard, however others began to embrace the chimeric nature of the postcard – its ability to exist simultaneously as many different documentary forms – and began reviewing these forms in context with each other, rather than simply as disparate elements. Researchers such as Vanderwood and Samponaro, Wayne Martin Mellinger,[79] and Brooke Baldwin[80] have offered compelling revelations of contemporary attitudes by analyzing postcard messages in relation to their images, thereby giving lie to any assertion that these inscriptions are too individualized to offer an understanding of a broader society.

Because postcards have a great consistency of image and frequently message as well, and because they were sent and received in so many numbers, researchers like Preston and Rosenthal have been able to utilize them to determine when and why postcards were sent to and from particular destinations.

Postcards may not be suitable for some research, but this is not to say they do not hold a legitimate place in the canon of record types. Virtually any documentary form requires an appropriate context in which to function as evidence for a historian or social scientist, and postcards are no exception. Researchers who have turned their minds to the postcard's capacity for "recordness" have understood that these objects can provide serious insights into aspects of society that have been forgotten or obscured by "important" or "official" versions of events. There is also a growing acknowledgement that picture postcards present a cultural iconography – one that showcases what Sculle refers to as the "humanistic sensibilities"[81] of society at a given time. Postcards' large numbers, highly standardized image content, and liberal use of staged scenes, retouching, labelling, (and mislabeling), in order to present an idealized view of places and people (what David Prochaska likens to an "imaginary visual encyclopedia"[82]), have also proven to be an excellent means by which to posit that photographic images are saturated with an interpretive meaning that has been assigned to them through the technical, social,

78 Peter Wosh, "Going Postal," *American Archivist* 61 (Spring 1998), p. 239.

79 Wayne Martin Mellinger, "Toward a Critical Analysis of Tourism Representations," *Annals of Tourism Research* 21, no. 4 (1994), pp. 774–75.

80 Brooke Baldwin, "On the Verso: Postcard Messages as a Key to Popular Prejudices," *Journal of Popular Culture* 22 (1988).

81 Sculle, "'Gee, but aint money slippery at Old Orchard Beach, Me.?'," p. 66.

82 Prochaska, "Fantasia of the *Photothèque,*" p. 47.

and cultural context in which they were made. Further, postcards' messages provide a multitude of insights into everyday society that are not commonly found elsewhere, or if found elsewhere, not typically in such ample quantities.

By the late 1990s, this need to apologize or legitimize the postcard finally seems to be unnecessary. Researchers such as Lisa Sigel are able to use even the most dubious of postcards – the pornographic postcard – as a legitimate form of cultural research with nary a whiff of apology for her subject matter, either sexual or postal.[83] Other scholars have chosen to focus not on the antiquated views of the Golden Age, but on iconography and meaning in the contemporary picture postcard.[84]

The last ten years have seen a small but steady increase in postcard research, as academics' comfort level with the more challenging aspects of postcards rise. Equally important is researchers' dawning understanding that a collectivity of postcards can meet any of an infinite number of criteria set by a researcher (such as common temporal, geographic, cultural, or semiotic elements). As such, they can function as David Prochaska's "imaginary encyclopedia," or, in the words of Vanderwood and Samponaro, "mini diaries": "When stitched together, [these] brief writings reveal how the senders felt about themselves and their experiences, or at least what they wanted others to believe about them."[85] Through postcards, it is possible to create a biography, not of "great men," but a cultural biography of ourselves.

It was the Cretan tour guide's loss that she wasn't able to see that "what they did every day" is the stuff of history, society, culture. That from such a medium "emerges a murmur of small voices speaking of minor aches and pains, long-awaited engagements, obscure family feuds; reporting on safe arrivals and unexpected delays; ordering goat cheese; acknowledging receipt of a bouquet of violets, a bonnet; in short, carrying on the millions of minute transactions, the grain of everyday life."[86]

83 Lisa Z. Sigel, "Filth in the Wrong People's Hands: Postcards and the Expansion of Pornography in Britain and the Atlantic World, 1880–1914," *Journal of Social History* 33 (Summer 2000).

84 Tim Jon Semmerling, *Israeli and Palestinian Postcards: Presentations of National Self* (Austin, 2004).

85 Vanderwood and Samponaro, *Border Fury,* x.

86 Schor, "*Cartes postales:* Representing Paris 1900," p. 239.